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‘The RIGHT COURSE for me’

BY KELLEY BRUSS

Dual paths in history, law prepared Tomiko Brown-Nagin to lead Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute

Judith Bainbridge has a vivid memory of the student who didn’t take her advice.

Tomiko Brown-Nagin ’92 loved history and envisioned herself pursuing a Ph.D. and then teaching. But she also was passionate about the law and its role in shaping history. She wanted a law degree, too.

Bainbridge, who was then Furman’s director of educational services, told her she’d have to choose between the two. But Brown-Nagin disagreed.

“I didn’t have it all figured out,” she says. “But I was adventurous and willing to take risks.”

After graduating from Furman, Brown-Nagin simultaneously pursued a Ph.D. in history from Duke University and a law degree from Yale.

“So much for my intelligence! She obviously did both brilliantly,” Bainbridge says.

Brown-Nagin practiced law in New York City for two years before returning to academia as a law professor, most recently at the Harvard Law School. In July, she became the dean of Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Radcliffe’s mission is to create new ideas by bringing scholars together from across disciplines, particularly in the study of gender and women’s issues.

It’s “profoundly interdisciplinary,” Brown-Nagin says, a natural progression from her beginning in a liberal arts environment. Furman laid the groundwork for her academic career with interdisciplinary studies, travel opportunities and personal connections with teachers who had a significant influence on her love of history.
Brown-Nagin stands in front of Agassiz Hall in Radcliffe Yard. The building commemorates the efforts of Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, who led a group of women and men in 1879 to create the Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women (nicknamed the Harvard Annex) for women's instruction by Harvard faculty. The Annex later became Radcliffe College and is now home to the Radcliffe Institute.
Brown-Nagin remembers the conversations Bainbridge mentioned.

“She (Bainbridge) wasn’t one to hold back about her opinion,” Brown-Nagin says, a smile in her voice.

But she also remembers Bainbridge’s guidance and encouragement to pursue a prestigious Truman Scholarship, which Brown-Nagin won in 1991. “I’m very grateful that she had those high hopes for me and pushed me,” she says.

ROOTED IN HISTORY

Long before she began college, Brown-Nagin had a strong sense of the history that surrounded her as a black woman in the South.

She was born in Edgefield County, which is also the birthplace of former U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond and former U.S. Senator and former Governor Ben Tillman. These men are among a long list of “characters in South Carolina history who made a point of being resistant to racial change,” she says.

Her family’s experiences within that history ingrained in her an admiration for the law and the people who wielded it to effect change.

Brown-Nagin says anyone society labels “successful” undoubtedly has known the sting of some failures and the weight of uncertainty. She’s no exception.

Her mother went to college when Brown-Nagin was in law school.

“It certainly wasn’t for lack of talent or interest; it was purely opportunity,” she says.

Her mother’s long-delayed college experience contributed to Brown-Nagin’s commitment to greater access within higher education.

“In some ways, it seems it was inevitable that I would become more and more interested in history as a profession,” she says.

Marian Strobel is the William Montgomery Burnett Professor of History and chair of the faculty at Furman. She remembers Brown-Nagin as a freshman, sitting center front in a western civilization class.

“Within the first week, I knew this child was a keeper, and I was just hoping she would want to be a history major,” Strobel says. She soon became Brown-Nagin’s advisor.

Strobel’s passion fueled her student’s. Brown-Nagin studied American history, Russian history and early modern history. By the end of her junior year, she knew she wanted a career that would allow her to connect with students and to study history the way she was being taught to study it at Furman.

Brown-Nagin engaged in classroom work in a way that drew others in, too.
“Her brilliance was not the type that would turn off other people,” Strobel says. “She often had the facility to say something, which then would get other people talking.”

But she didn’t stop at classroom work. She took opportunities to study abroad, work as an intern and do independent study.

Kirby Mitchell ’90 is a senior litigation attorney with South Carolina Legal Services. He was responsible for supervising the first five Furman students who interned with legal aid; Brown-Nagin was one of them.

“She was personable with clients and funny with her classmates,” Mitchell says. “But you also couldn’t miss her drive. We all thought, ‘Tomiko will be whatever she wants – a college president, a judge.’”

TWO FIELDS, ONE STORY

After finishing at Furman, Brown-Nagin earned a master’s degree in history from Duke, then went to Yale for her first year of law school. With Yale’s approval, she became a joint degree candidate and returned to Duke to finish her Ph.D. coursework.

“I did shuttle back and forth, which is not something I can imagine doing today,” she says. “It sounds crazy.”

William Chafe, the Alice Mary Baldwin Professor Emeritus of history at Duke, was Strobel’s advisor when she was at Duke and then advised Brown-Nagin, a “superb student,” when she followed her Furman teacher there.

“She came to Duke with a clear intent of getting both degrees,” Chafe says. “It’s an amazing story of purposefulness.”


“She did exactly what she needed to do to write the book that she most cared about,” Chafe says.

Brown-Nagin is currently finishing her next book, a biography of Constance Baker Motley, the daughter of a Yale chef who became a civil rights lawyer and then the first black woman to serve as a federal judge.

Studying Motley’s life has helped Brown-Nagin continue to shape her own ideas about public service and social commitment.

Her new role at Radcliffe provides a place for those ideas to grow and help shape others.

RADCLIFFE

Radcliffe College, the renowned women’s college affiliated with Harvard, merged formally with Harvard in 1999 to become the Radcliffe Institute.

The institute’s highly competitive fellowship program funds 50 scholars and artists annually, giving them quiet time to reflect, research and write. Brown-Nagin was a Radcliffe fellow in 2016.

“She knows first-hand how the Radcliffe fellowship program makes a difference in the lives of individual scholars and artists, and how its library and academic programs hold promise for pursuing truth and bridging disparate worlds,” says Martha Minow, Carter Professor of General Jurisprudence at Harvard and former dean of Harvard Law School. “I am one of so many who look forward to her leadership in this new and important role.”

Radcliffe’s Academic Ventures program fuels collaborative scholarly work and makes that work accessible to the public through programs such as lectures and conferences. Its Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America houses an archive that Brown-Nagin calls “preeminent” among collections on the history of American women.

The institute’s focus on bringing scholars together from across disciplines “reflects my own scholarly life and trajectory,” she says.

While her first months have focused on getting to know the work already underway at Radcliffe, Brown-Nagin expects to make her own mark on the institute. She looks forward to projects related to the role of the law, inclusion, public service, access to higher education, and the people on society’s margins. “It will reflect who I am as a scholar,” she says.

Brown-Nagin says anyone society labels “successful” undoubtedly has known the sting of some failures and the weight of uncertainty. She’s no exception. But looking back, she sees how the pieces fit together perfectly.

“I took the right course for me.”

Those who wondered about the course at its outset are celebrating with her today.

“It’s really, really a prestigious appointment and I’m so proud of her,” Bainbridge says.

And they have high expectations for her future – possibilities such as university president or judge come up in multiple conversations.

“I would not be surprised by any of those things in the next 10 years,” Mitchell says.

The formal announcement of her deanship.

Following the formal announcement of her deanship, Brown-Nagin meets Radcliffe Institute faculty, staff and supporters.

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